

# OGLALA LAKOTA NATION



## **Oglala Lakota Court Appointed Special Advocate Program Pine Ridge, South Dakota**

<b>Founded:</b>	1997
<b>Service area:</b>	2.8 million acres in rural South Dakota (Pine Ridge Indian Reservation)
<b>Population:</b>	35,000; tribal enrollment 17,775
<b>Source of funding:</b>	federal, National CASA
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## **Program Description**

The Oglala Lakota Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) Program, a nonprofit organization founded in 1997, is dedicated to ensuring that each child has a voice in court and that no child is forgotten. CASA volunteers appear in tribal courts in the towns of Kyle and Pine Ridge on the reservation. Thanks to the dedication of the five-member board and the vision of the executive director, Oglala Lakota CASA has developed into a well-respected and highly valued service to abused and neglected Oglala children.

The court appointed special advocate model has been in place in state and county court systems since the 1980s. Since 1995, with support from the National CASA Association, these programs have begun to emerge in tribal court systems as well. The purpose of the CASA program is to exclusively provide a voice for abused and neglected children in the court system. Under the national model, community volunteers are trained and then assigned to represent specific children involved in abuse and neglect proceedings in court. The Oglala Lakota CASA volunteers

are officially appointed to represent children in Oglala Lakota Tribal Court. In addition, through a Children's Justice Act grant, some volunteers have received special training to accompany Oglala child sexual abuse victims and child witnesses in proceedings before federal court. With their pool of volunteers representing each district on the reservation, Oglala Lakota CASA served approximately 40 to 50 children in tribal court in 2001.

## **Community Connections**

Arlana Bettelyoun, Executive Director of the program since 1998, realized that community-based Lakota volunteers were the key to the success of this tribal CASA program. Despite the geographical challenge of covering the entire reservation as the program's only staff person, Bettelyoun knew that personal contact was essential to assure victims and their families and neighbors that the CASA efforts were credible and respectful. Thus, Bettelyoun, using her personal vehicle, drove to each of the many different communities within the reservation. She shared the purpose of CASA and the important need of each child to have a voice in court. Many people

expressed interest in becoming CASA volunteers, but resources were limited and the required travel to and from court was a challenge. Some people did not even have cars, much less funds to pay for the needed mileage. But the volunteers saw the special need of the children and, in the tradition of the Lakota people, who believe children are sacred and their spirits must be protected, many community members still stepped forward to help. Even those who did not have cars wanted to help. Some volunteers without transportation were paired with those who could help transport them. Some elders or couples shared the casework with a partner to enhance the involvement with the child and the case issues. In spite of the early challenges, the Lakota people continued to express support for the program, and encouraged Bettelyoun to pursue funding to expand its capacity to represent children. Eventually, the CASA program obtained funds that allowed reimbursement to volunteers for their mileage costs to make home visits, meet with service providers and case managers, and appear in court—all necessary activities in their roles as child advocates. In addition, new funds made possible some specialized training opportunities to increase the skills of CASA volunteers.

Today, the program has 12 active volunteers in addition to the executive director and the child advocacy coordinator. The dedication of the volunteers has not gone unnoticed. In October 2001, the CASA Tribal Court Advisory Committee and the National CASA staff joined the Oglala Lakota CASA Program at the 15th Annual Powwow in Rapid City, South Dakota. During the powwow, tribal CASA volunteers from Pine Ridge were recognized with an Honor Dance.

## Special Features

In 2001, Oglala Lakota CASA hosted a reservationwide conference on child sexual abuse and forensic interview training for investigators.

The “Wakanyeja Ob Kinanjinpi Nan Awanwicaglakapi” (Stand Up for the Children and Watch Out for Them) event had nearly 200 participants from a wide range of tribal programs, tribal courts, and law

enforcement, and representatives from federal agencies such as the U.S. Attorney’s Office and the U.S. District Court. This event served to elevate awareness and increase collaboration between programs serving Oglala children and families.

Oglala Lakota CASA staff are also active in the Oglala Oyate Iwicakiyapi Okolakiciye (OOIO) (Society to Strengthen Children and Families)—a network of service providers, community groups, and individuals committed to promoting the welfare and best interests of children and families on the reservation. OOIO works on tribal legislation, policy development, and program and service improvement. One effort that resulted from the interagency work was the development of a special mental health service for CASA children. Through a cooperative relationship with Cangleska, Inc., an Oglala nonprofit service for domestic violence and sexual assault victims, CASA cases are staffed with a Lakota psychologist. The CASA program currently has a position available for a staff mental health counselor to serve the needs of CASA children, but it has been difficult to fill.

The Oglala Lakota CASA staff and volunteers provide a wide range of support for children. The credibility of the program is evident in the fact that the program has become a referral center for all types of issues relating to child abuse. Although most of the referrals to CASA come from the court, CASA is increasingly contacted by community members and family members who are reporting possible abuse, and extended family members contact CASA because they want to support children in tribal court actions. CASA staff provide information, education, and referrals to anyone needing information about child abuse and neglect.

Oglala Lakota CASA continues its outreach to the community to recruit volunteers and to educate the community about the serious problem of child abuse. Volunteer training is held in different districts of the tribe to reach out to and recruit community members. Not every volunteer who receives training remains active, but the training they receive is valuable nonetheless.

Oglala Lakota CASA has also developed public service announcements (PSAs) for both radio and print media, such as the Well Nations magazine. This keeps the issue of CASA and the needs of abused Lakota children in the public consciousness.

## Planning for the Future

Executive Director Bettelyoun serves on the South Dakota State CASA Board; Child Advocacy Coordinator Bev Tuttle and members of the CASA Board are active in many efforts both locally and nationally that address the needs of tribal children. These grassroots efforts and commitments are the foundation for future goals. Oglala Lakota CASA's goals for the future include continuing to develop the pool of Lakota volunteers so that eventually every child will "have a voice" in the judicial system. The program also is seeking to improve the justice system to better meet the needs of Oglala Lakota children. The program is involved through OOIO with revisions and improvements to the tribal children's code and development of interagency protocols and agreements. The goal of these efforts is to develop a coordinated community response to child abuse that will include a "circle" of investigators, prosecutors, and victim service providers. The foundation of the system will be the Lakota philosophy that "children are sacred."

Oglala Lakota CASA began as a struggling non-profit and has developed into a well-respected and trusted organization that ensures each child has a voice in court and helps the child along the path of healing. With the strength and determination of its staff and volunteers, and the support of its board of directors and the tribal government, Oglala Lakota CASA will continue to grow and to improve the lives of Oglala Lakota children.

## Keys to Success

- ◆ Build on community strengths. Lakota people have tremendous commitment to their children and there is huge interest and support in the community for helping the children.

- ◆ Integrate traditional practices. Recognize that cultural and ceremonial needs of the children must be integrated into the services, especially in the courtroom.
- ◆ Build respect by hiring Native staff and recruiting Native volunteers.
- ◆ Link victim services to the judicial system. Oglala Lakota CASA has gained the respect and trust of the Oglala Lakota judiciary because of the important role it plays in the courtroom.
- ◆ Coordinate and collaborate. The Oglala Oyate Iwicakiyapi Okolakiciye (Society to Strengthen Children and Families) represents a reservationwide network of agencies and programs working together to address problems, promote healing, and bring about change.
- ◆ Engage leadership. The Oglala Sioux Tribal government support is fundamental to the growth and development of the Oglala Lakota CASA Program.

## Quotes

*We have never had problems finding volunteers who wanted to be the 'voice for the child' in our tribal court cases. Lakota people have a huge interest in their children, and have made serious commitments to reaching out to protect children and promote healing for the abused child.*

—Arlana Bettelyoun  
Executive Director  
Oglala Lakota CASA

*We did not inherit the earth from our ancestors, we borrow it from our children.*

—Tasunke Witko  
Crazy Horse

*Let us put our minds together and see what a difference we can make for our children.*

—Chief Sitting Bull